

WHAT YOU DO VERSUS WHO YOU ARE

HOME-LEARNING ACTIVITIES, SOCIAL ORIGIN AND
COGNITIVE SKILLS AMONG YOUNG CHILDREN IN IRELAND
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What you do versus who you are: Home-learning activities, social origin and cognitive skills among young children in Ireland¹

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INTRODUCTION

How do parents pass on advantage or disadvantage to their children? Previous research has found marked differences in cognitive ability even in young children depending on their social origin, measured as family social class, parents' education or family income: 'who their parents are'. Numerous studies have shown that parents' involvement with their child's learning – 'what parents do' – influences cognitive development, but also that children's home learning environment is linked to social origin. This article explores the link between social origin and vocabulary among young children in Ireland, and the role played by home-learning activities.

DATA AND METHODS

This study used data from the infant cohort of Growing Up in Ireland (GUI). GUI is a national longitudinal study of children and members of the Infant Cohort were born between December 2007 and June 2008. They were first visited when 9 months old, again at just 3 years, then age 5 years. This study focussed on a detailed questionnaire for the primary caregiver (PCG) (in almost all cases the mother) and developmental tests at age 3 and 5.²

The measure of cognitive development used was the child's score for expressive (naming) vocabulary at age 3 years, and then again at 5 years old.³ Children's scores were compared by family social class, mother's education, and family income. They were also compared by the amount of home learning activities – activities performed with the child that may enhance their learning

¹ This Bulletin summarises the findings from: McMullin P., McGinnity, F., Murray, A. and Russell, H. (2020). 'What you do versus who you are: home learning activities, social origin and cognitive skills among young children in Ireland' European Sociological Review. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcaa012>

² See Williams, J. et al. (2013). Growing up in Ireland. Development from Birth to Three Years. Infant Cohort. Dublin: Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs for further details.

³ The test was administered directly by a trained interviewer in the child's home and requires the child to name (in English) the objects displayed on a series of illustrated cards (e.g. 'shoe').

and cognitive development, including how often anyone at home reads to the child, does painting/colouring, sings/says nursery rhymes, does jigsaws or play-doh.

RESULTS

Consistent with previous research, children tended to know more words when they came from households with greater socio-economic resources. The method separated out the contributions of parental education, household income and family social class. The largest gaps in vocabulary scores were linked to mothers' education: the children of highly-educated mothers had higher average scores on vocabulary than children whose mothers have lower education. Higher income and social class were also associated with higher vocabulary scores at age 3. Although mothers' education, family income and social class are related to each other, each had a separate link to children's vocabulary.

More frequent home learning activities were linked to higher vocabulary scores. However, the extent of home learning accounted for only a very small part of the difference by mothers' education and none of the family income or social class differences. We found some evidence that home learning activities were more important for vocabulary development in children from families with low income and lower social class backgrounds, thereby compensating somewhat for disadvantage. Home learning activities also encouraged vocabulary development between age 3 and 5, reducing the gap in vocabulary between high- and low-income children.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND FOR PARENTS

These findings suggest that it may be beneficial for policymakers to consider ways to support and educate parents in how to enrich the learning potential of individual homes (such as schemes to widen access to suitable books and providing advice on how parents can foster children's early learning). However, cognitive stimulation and activities parents provide for preschool children form only one element of a more complex relationship between social origin and cognitive outcomes. Structural social inequalities affect parents' mental and physical health, the quality of their own educational experiences, and the availability of social support, all of which affect parents' capacity to provide a home environment that facilitates cognitive development. Interventions that focus just on 'improving parents' without addressing wider structural inequalities are likely to have limited effects.

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